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SUBJECT: QUEBEC STUDENT STRIKES HEAT UP

¶11. The student movement in Quebec against cuts in education funding was background noise just a few days ago but is now front and center as student action gains support across the province. Close to 200,000 students - from secondary school through university - voted in favor of unlimited strikes. On March 24, thousands of resolute young Quebecers, from regions as far as the Saguenay and Gaspe, gathered before the National Assembly and Education Ministry buildings to vent their anger.

¶12. University, CEGEP (junior college), and now high school students are raucously protesting \$103 million worth of Liberal government cuts in student grants. The cuts announced by former Education Minister Pierre Reid (since removed in a cabinet reshuffle) convert student grants into student loans. While Quebec students pay the lowest tuition fees in Canada ("in the world," according to Premier Charest), the students argue that Charest's cuts penalize the least fortunate students and are a reversal of Quebec's hard-won success in making education accessible to all. (Francophone Quebecers are quick to recall that, historically, they were the least educated Canadians and consequently shut out of higher paying jobs.)

¶13. Most of the well-oiled demonstrations are being led by the "Federation etudiante universitaire du Quebec (FEUQ) and the "Coalition de l'Association pour une solidarite syndicale etudiante elargie (CASSEE)." They have made their case through the media and via unannounced roadblocks, the occupation of government offices, sit-ins, hunger strikes and open defiance of riot police. As momentum picks up, the education ministry is reminding students that if agreement with the provincial government is not reached by April 1, students will be forced to take additional classes during the summer. The new Education minister, Jean-Marc Fournier (who inherited the student grant problem from his predecessor) is urging students to come back to the table.

¶14. Comment: Public support for the students is founded not so much on the merits of the case (most Quebecers agree that tuition fees in Quebec are low) as on opposition to Charest's government in general. The Premier is having a tough time selling his vision of "less government," be it ending government grants to students; initiating public/private partnerships; reducing energy subsidies; or reducing the number of government workers. Latest polls indicate opposition to the Charest government stands at 76 percent. Even if Education minister Fournier manages to negotiate a compromise with the students, we expect further unrest and resistance from other sectors of the Quebec population in the months ahead as Charest tries to implement government reform.

FRIEDMAN